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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of the currently held feelings and beliefs of school administrators toward vocational education. One hundred thirty-five secondary school principals and superintendents were interviewed using inductive methodology to gather imperical data. Based on the interviews, administrators were classified into two major categories: true believers and non-believers. Among the findings of the study were that (1) true believers contended that students needed to possess saleable job skills upon leaving high school; (2) non-believers were comprised of persons either who perceived the role of vocational education to be exploratory rather than specialized training or who totally rejected the worth of job training at the secondary school level; and (3) all administrators indicated a concern for compliance with statutes, rules, and regulations associated with approved vocational programs, but there were dramatic differences in how administrators allowed these requirements to impact on program development and implementation. (IRA)

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FINAL REPORT

PROJECT NO. 78AFK(134)NP

Understanding the Attitudes of Secondary School Principals and Superintendents in the State of Washington Toward Vocational Education

Research Project in Vocational Education
Conducted under
Public Law 94-482

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This study is directly related to Project No. 76-ATT (278) NP, Attitudes of Secondary School Principals and Superintendents In The State of Washington Toward Vocational Education.

March 31, 1979

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SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

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INSTITUTION:	Renton School District #403 Renton Vocational Technical Institute
PROJECT DURATION:	February, 1977 to March , 1979

PURPOSE:

This study was conducted to gain an indepth understanding of the currently held feelings and beliefs of school administrators toward vocational education so that a series of realistic strategies could be formulated to alter the attitudes of these school principals and superintendents toward vocational education.

PROCEDURES:

Researchers used an analytic inductive methodology to develop their classification scheme in conjunction with symbolic interaction analysis techniques to test and refine their hypotheses.

A list of 457 superintendents and principals in the State of Washington was used from the predecessor study to randomly select 135 potential interviewees. These administrators were then grouped by geographic locations and interview schedules were set up. Using inductive methodology to gather imperical data, the researchers were able to identify two major categories: 'True Believers' and 'Non-Believers'.

Through further analysis, the researchers were able to divide the 'True Believer' group into 'Actor' and 'Reactor' and the 'Non-Believers' category into two groups: 'Believe we are Doers' and 'Don't Doers'. The process of formulating and reformulating hypotheses was facilitated by formally synthesizing data at the close of the 11th, 21st, 31st and 41st interviews. Each synthesizing stage revealed the progressive integration of concepts. The final conceptualization which was formulated after the 41st interview was presented to five subsequent interviewees to insure that the researcher could, in fact, predict how given kinds of administrators would respond in expressing their perceptions toward vocational education.

RESULTS:

'True Believers' contended that students needed to possess saleable job skills upon leaving high school. Perceived restrictions due to statutes, codes, and regulations resulted in some assuming a less aggressive or inactive approach to program planning and implementation.

'Non-Believers' were comprised of persons who either perceived the proper role of vocational education to be exploratory rather than specialized training or who totally rejected the worth of job training at the secondary school level.

No real differences were found for selected social variables between categories and sub-categories of administrators.

Compliance with statutes, rules and regulations associated with approved vocational programs was a concern of all administrators; however, there were dramatic differences in how administrators allowed these requirements to impact program development and implementation.

CONCLUSIONS - RECOMMENDATIONS

Local administrators who support vocational education and the state agencies regulating vocational education need to establish a dialogue to increase understanding and to confirm that compliance is accomplished with a minimum of regulation and of report requirements.

The Office of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction needs to take the initiative in working with principals and superintendents who are not supporters of vocational education. There is a need to both understand and to value training for those jobs not requiring a baccalaureate or higher degree.

The Office of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction should designate a single person to assist local administrators in coping with mandated legal requirements in program approval, funding, teacher certification, and program reports.

UNDERSTANDING THE ATTITUDES OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS AND SUPERINTENDENTS IN THE STATE OF WASHINGTON TOWARD VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Problem

Approximately eighty (80) percent of the nation's productive work force is employed in occupations for which a baccalaureate or higher degree is not an entry-level requirement. Numerous job opportunities continue to exist due to replacement and expansion needs.

Historically, however, public secondary education has generally failed to recognize the realities of this job market and has acted as if virtually all persons were either to be employed as professionals or managers or as if job preparation were almost exclusively the concern of post-secondary institutions. Increasingly, students, management, and labor demand that public secondary schools equip students with the knowledge and skill necessary for them to directly enter the labor force after leaving high school or at least to be able to continue their training through community colleges, vocational-technical institutes, apprenticeship programs, proprietary schools, and other agencies.

Building principals, central office administrators, and school boards need to be willing to meet the desires and needs of students, labor and management by implementing new and expanded vocational offerings. It is believed by many, however, that expanded vocational efforts cannot be dependent upon additional monies, but will have to rely on a redirection of existing resources and on a wiser use of those resources. The fact that student population is no longer increasing means that vocational education can increase its service only if college preparatory and general education efforts diminish. Those who influence school policy and practice including course offerings must then be supportive of vocational education.

A recently completed study, "Attitudes of Secondary School Principals and Superintendents in the State of Washington Toward Vocational Education", found that key administrators do not have a broad understanding of vocational education and do not have a generally favorable attitude toward vocational education.

The real reasons for lack of understanding and negative attitudes toward vocational education were not known.

If vocational education at the secondary school level is to be expanded within the constraints of present funding and existing learner time, administrator understanding of vocational education must be increased and attitudes must be altered to be more supportive of vocational education.

Related Research

The general failure of vocational education at the secondary level to prepare students to enter the world of work or to continue their occupational training after high school in numbers coincident to labor market demands is ascribed to a number of factors. Foremost among these factors is the charge that school superintendents and secondary school principals are antagonistic or at least indifferent to vocational education. However, it was reported by Gerald Leighbody (1972) in Vocational Education in America's Schools that limited research had been done to verify this reported antagonism and lack of support by the academic decision-makers in the common schools.

A 1976 study, "Attitudes of Secondary School Principals and Superintendents in the State of Washington Toward Vocational Education," found that key administrators had neither an understanding of vocational education nor a generally favorable attitude toward vocational education. Specifically, 93.4 per cent do not have a broad understanding of vocational education: 87.6 per cent could not differentiate vocational education from career education; 89.8 per cent do not have a generally favorable attitude toward vocational education; and 38.4 per cent have a very unfavorable attitude toward vocational education. In addition, the previous study did not reveal any real difference on selected social variables between administrators who are in favor of expanding vocational education with present funding and those who believe that a larger portion of the high school curriculum than at present should be devoted to vocational education.

These findings were in direct contradiction with the results of seven other major studies cited in the "Attitudes" study which found that the attitudes of school board members and administrators were generally favorable to vocational education.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to develop an in-depth understanding of currently held feelings and beliefs of secondary school principals and superintendents about vocational education so that a series of realistic strategies to alter those attitudes could be formulated.

Objectives

The staff of this project recognized that humans who actively participate in formulating designs for change develop personal commitments to successful completion of the process, and so the staff tried to elicit this kind of active participation from select superintendents and principals by personally interviewing them. This was done in order to understand why they hold their present attitudes towards vocational education and to identify procedures intended to increase understanding and support of vocational activities. The objectives, then, were as follows:

1. To interview select secondary school principals and superintendents.

2. To record feelings toward vocational education.

3. To identify underlying causal factors leading to currently held attitudes toward vocational education.

4. To identify clusters of recurring attitudes.

5. To integrate the identified concepts and attitudes toward vocational education in a final report.

6. To develop specific strategies to alter identified negative concepts.

7. To recommend a strategy for continuing involvement of secondary principals and superintendents for altering attitudes toward vocational education.

Procedures

General:

This study was based on the assumption that an understanding of expressed attitudes toward vocational education will have direct implications for formulating and implementing steps to improve the attitudes of select school administrators toward vocational education.

The strategy employed in this study was based on methodology espoused by Herbert Blumer in Symbolic Interactionism - Perspective and Method and by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss in The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research. The predecessory study, "Attitudes of... Principals and Superintendents ...", contains an addendum summarizing these theories.

In discovering why different kinds of educational administrators act, react, plan, and feel in the ways that they do, the researchers studied attitudes--needs, interests, desires, opinions, judgments, likes, dislikes, appreciations, ideals, values, impulses, desires, feelings, traits -- without a preconceived theory to dictate relevancies prior to the research. This methodology presupposed the following:

1. Principals and superintendents could identify themselves and others in relation to conceptual classifications that allow a meaningful categorization and sub-categorization of principals and superintendents. Analytic induction would be a meaningful method of sampling in that the researcher would be able to confirm the classification scheme while in the act of conducting interviews to generate such a scheme.

2. Symbolic interaction theory would permit an effective and valid methodology for this research as one can test and refine one's hypotheses while in the act of gathering data.

Respondents:

While analytic induction methodology rejects the traditional approach of blindly categorizing subjects and arbitrarily specifying the number and/or percentage of participants, it was necessary to establish a list of interviewees.

Seventy (70) useable potential interviewees were randomly selected from a list of 457 superintendents and principals in Washington State which had been used in the previous study. Another 30 useable potential interviewees were randomly selected as a back-up list should cancellations occur during road trips. Each potential interviewee was contacted by telephone to verify the availability for interview. In all, a total of 135 superintendents and principals were contacted before both random lists were formalized. Only those administrators who had moved out of state or were deceased or had since left the profession and could not be contacted were eliminated. From the formalized random list, administrators were grouped by geographical locations and interview schedules were set up.

The interviewees were asked not only to supply data regarding attitudes toward vocational education but also to identify categories and sub-categories (i.e., types or groups) of principals and superintendents. Because vocational education is not a major concern of superintendents and principals, they experienced great difficulty in identifying meaningful labels for the types and groups of fellow administrators. Nevertheless, they consistently spoke in terms of believing or not believing in the value of imparting saleable job skills to high school students. The researchers, therefore, were able to assign the titles of 'True Believers' and 'Non-Believers.'

In describing these types, respondents were queried in such a way as to specify similarities and differences between those two major groups. In structuring each interviewee's thoughts in light of what preceding interviewees had stated, it was possible to further hypothesize sub-groups of the 'Non-Believers'. 'Don't Doers' were composed of those who clearly understood but rejected the concept of vocational education. A second sub-category of 'Non-Believers' was composed of those who thought that they supported vocational education but, in fact, were proponents of a concept of career education which did not provide for the requirement of imparting saleable job skills to student participants. This sub-category was labeled 'Believe We're Doers.'

The 'Believers' group did not clearly divide into sub-groups. Rather it was composed of administrators who had a wide range in their commitment to vocational education. The extent of commitment was based on queried perceptions and on the realities of their operational capabilities. To facilitate understanding, the researcher divided 'True Believers' into two categories: 'Actors' and 'Reactors'.

Responses

Interviewees expressed their attitudes toward vocational education in the secondary schools. Hypotheses were formulated and when subsequently revealed facts failed to fit, the hypotheses were reformulated.

The process of formulating and reformulating hypotheses was facilitated by formally synthesizing data at the close of the 11th, 21st, 31st and 41st interviews. Each synthesization stage revealed the progressive integration of concepts.

Synthesization, then, resulted in a shifting of focus within the general research framework. The interview guide, therefore, was constantly revised by adding, deleting, and altering specific questions and responses.

The final conceptualization formulated after the 41st interview was then presented to five subsequent interviewees to insure that the researcher could, in fact, predict how given kinds of administrators would respond in expressing their self-perceptions toward vocational education.

Results

Attitudes - Types of Respondents

Within the administrators who comprised the 'True Believers' category, i.e., administrators who favored the 'saleable skills' concept, the 'Actors' were separated from the 'Reactors' on the basis of their attitudes and behavior patterns in response to the state vocational agencies' mandates for categorical funding, teacher certification and program reports.

The 'Actors' were the more vocal group in stating their concerns and discontent with these procedures but also were more aggressive in developing strategies and internal procedures which would allow them to implement their programs despite the perceived restrictions from the state level. In some instances, these administrators talked of developing plans which would provide vocational programs in their districts without state aid.

The 'Reactors' tended not to be as vocal about vocational requirements although they are more apt to let them stand in the way of their planning and implementation of vocational education programs. These administrators, while believing in the saleable skills concept of vocational education, were generally more reactive than active, and thus had implemented a more limited vocational education program.

Both sub-categories of 'True Believers' perceived the state vocational agencies as a deterrent to the efforts of local administrators to develop and implement vocational education programs.

Overall, superintendents and principals who were 'True Believers' of vocational education, especially those in the 'Actors' category, spoke and acted as if they were more organized, were better managers for their districts as a whole, had funding in better control, and had more and better vocational education programs.

Within those comprising the 'Non-Believers' category, 'Don't Doers', espoused a strong anti-vocational education philosophy. These administrators had no use for vocational education on the secondary level and would prefer to see more logic, philosophy and 'academically demanding' courses as the total curriculum component. Nevertheless, they tended to include some vocational programs in their curriculum, primarily because they perceived the programs as being 'good public relations with the community.'

The 'Believe We're Doers' were more difficult to define. Generally, these administrators confused "career education" concepts with "vocational education" concepts. They perceived themselves as good supporters of their brand of vocational education, namely, a broad curricula whereby the student had a degree of exposure to vocational training, but they did not see the secondary school as a responsible agent for providing job entry skills training for students. Most of these administrators rationalized this viewpoint as being consistent with their understanding of the definition of a comprehensive high school.

One additional point to be made about the 'Non-Believers' was the frustration they also felt with the state vocational agencies' requirements for categorical funding, teacher certification and program reports. While their responses were similar to those of the 'True Believers', their reactions differed somewhat.

The 'Don't Doers' justified their belief in schools with only minimal vocational training by contending that the hassle of compliance was exceedingly disproportionate to the worth of the programs. This, however, is perfectly understandable as they do not accept or support the concept of preparing high school leavers with entry level job skills.

The 'Believe We're Doers' had negative feelings for categorical funding, teacher certification, and overall paperwork, too. In addition, they do not accept the State's definition of vocational education and tend to plan to implement programs which are more in keeping with a career education concept which alters vocational education curriculum content to the point that students who seek vocational education skills in their schools would not be expected to exit from their institutions with completely developed skills for entering into the job market.

Attitudes - Commonly Held

In the deductive approach, one might assume that there are a number of factors that would influence attitudes and behaviors and that these might be influenced by the individual's experiences. For example, it generally might be assumed that if one had been in an occupation not requiring a baccalaureate or higher degree that one would obviously be in favor of vocational education. But this is not true, because some administrators were supporters of vocational education even though their backgrounds did not include work in those occupations· and, at the same time, some administrators with trade experience were not favorable toward vocational education.

A commonly shared perspective or viewpoint of those 'Believers' and 'Non-Believers' who were distant from Olympia by miles was that the state vocational agencies were not sensitive to their local problems. These administrators felt that communication between them and the state vocational agencies was largely one way in that state personnel simply made demands without any understanding of what administrators faced within their districts in their attempts to plan and implement vocational programs. Consolidation plans, class sizes, availability of vocational education teachers, and low population density areas which required students to travel long distances to participate in programs were some factors which administrators felt state personnel did not recognize or were not able to take into account due to inflexible laws or rules and regulations.

The superintendents and principals believed that the most important ingredient of vocational education programs was the classroom teacher. They talked from the standpoint that when the program was strong they tended to give credit to the teacher. If the program was weak, on the other hand, they would not directly blame the teacher but tended to cite other factors such as funding and travel distance. But when queried further they consistently came back to a discussion of the teacher's capabilities or lack thereof.

A majority of the principals interviewed cited the problem of teacher morale among total staff caused by preferrential time-pay treatment for vocational teachers. However, two principals and two superintendents said they had no morale problem between the vocational education teachers and the regular teachers. All four of these administrators contended that they had very strong vocational education programs within their schools.

Principals also cited the problem of authority. Does the teacher answer to the principal or the vocational education person at the state level? They felt that there seems to be a conflict between the way the principal wants to run the school based on his analysis of the community and the way the state agency people want the teacher to teach those classes based on the set of requirements established to meet state or federal mandates. As the principals see it, the teacher is caught in the middle and does not know to whom to answer. It is interesting to note that the principals, rather than the superintendent, were more concerned with problems of conflict of authority and morale.

With the exception of only two districts, superintendents and principals said that public support for vocational education is strong. In fact, vocational education was the next priority right behind basic education in many communities.

Only four superintendents voiced any problem with the citizen advisory committees on vocational education. The overwhelming reaction was one of support for advisory committees.

Administrators commented that counselors were becoming more inclined to direct students into the vocational education programs. Administrators felt that any stigmatism that was attached to vocational education classes was declining.

While there was an across-the-board lack of knowledge on the understanding of a philosophy of vocational education, administrators had varying levels of operational knowledge.

In general, administrators spoke as if they were quite knowledgeable about vocational education. They identified areas of strengths and problems affecting vocational education as they understood them. In general, superintendents acted as if they were more knowledgeable of vocational education than were the high school principals.

There is no evidence that school administrators' attitudes toward vocational education develop in discussions with each other. They rarely, if ever, discussed vocational education among themselves. Although they discussed the general state of education, the "squeaky wheel" subjects received most of their attention so that the subject of vocational education seldom, if ever, arose.

Conclusions - Recommendations

It seems imperative that those who support the concept of vocational education (i.e. that of providing high school students with saleable job skills so that they can directly enter the world of work upon exiting from high school or so that they can at least continue their vocational preparation) understand the regulatory role required of the Commission on Vocational Education and the Office of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction. At the same time, the state agencies must be fully aware of local problems and concerns. A dialogue between these agencies and a representative group of principals and superintendents is suggested so that a mutual effort may be made to insure that the actual compliance with federal and state mandates occurrs with a minimum of regulation and of report requirements.

The administrators who do not support providing high school students with saleable job skills comprise a significant number of persons who will determine whether or not vocational education is available in the secondary schools. It is suggested that the Office of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction take the initiative in establishing a number of workshops and site visitations that are designed to first impart a knowledge of vocational education and then to develop a sense of value for the role of vocational education.

It is recommended that the Office of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction designate a single person as the contact for questions involving finance, certification, and reports. This person should be knowledgeable of the problems of school districts outside of the metropolitan area of Puget Sound. Further, this ombudsman should work with other state employees as an advocate of the school districts.